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ABSTRACT

In considering the issue of language and literacy, the following factors must be addressed: the nature of learning; the relationship between reading and learning; effective strategies and practices which promote literacy; and the responsibility of schools. Of the reading approaches and strategies which have been developed and implemented in an effort to ensure that children acquire reading skills, no evidence exists to substantiate the claim that the teaching of phonics produces readers; the effectiveness of whole language is difficult to assess; and the Reading Recovery Program has been found to be successful in solving early literacy problems, yet is costly. To ensure that all students acquire sufficient reading skills, it will become necessary for the schools' curricula to be adapted to accommodate the diverse learning styles of students. The six major national education goals outlined by President George Bush (in his America 2000 proposal) may be unattainable, inasmuch as vast numbers of American students are either poor readers or non-readers. The adoption of a goal that all students have proficient reading skills would likely promote the implementation of effective strategies to enhance reading skills. (RS)

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Language and Literacy: Implications for Enhancing Reading Instruction

By Sharon Brown-Haynes

Over the course of many years, much discussion has been generated regarding the purpose(s) of schools. One commonly perceived purpose of schools is to provide students with skills which allow them to read, write, and communicate so that they may become literate members of society. In an effort to reach the aforementioned end, educators have developed and implemented numerous programs and strategies with the hope of providing the best instruction to students.

In addressing the issue of language and literacy, the following factors must be addressed: the nature of learning, the relationship between reading and learning; effective strategies and practices which promote literacy; and the responsibility of schools.

Smith (1992) described two views of learning which are diametrically opposite - the official view and the informal view.

The official view is based upon an official theory of learning which was developed in a scientific, controlled, and dependable manner. Learning is considered an individual effort. This view advocates the short-term recall of presented information with periodic tests of the information. The official view considers learning to be the result of a deliberate action to memorize information after repeated exposure to the information.

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The informal view of learning is based upon socialization and collaboration and recognizes that children vicariously learn from the company they keep. This view advocates the exposure of children to the "literacy club" where they can identify with people who are able to read and write and can ultimately emulate these models of writing. The informal view considers learning to be continuous, spontaneous, and effortless.

The reading approaches and strategies which have been developed and implemented in an effort to ensure that children acquire reading skills include, but are not limited to the following: (a) the phonetic approach; (b) the whole language approach; and (c) the Reading Recovery Program.

The phonetic approach to reading has the main objective of developing independent word-attack skills in the readers (Turner, 1989). According to Turner, this approach teaches letter sounds and blends prior to teaching students to read whole words. The teaching of reading through the use of phonics is systematic instruction which appeals to individuals who possess the need to be in control (Smith, 1992). Unfortunately, no evidence exists to substantiate the claim that the teaching of phonics to children produces readers (Smith, 1992).

The whole language approach to reading teaches whole words to students and allows them to develop their own particular methods for decoding the sounds in unfamiliar words (Turner,

1989). This approach is based upon a philosophy of respect for language and respect for learners (Smith, 1992). Specific skills are not taught in isolation, instead, a specific skill is taught when the need for such a skill arises while the student is working on another assignment (Edelsky, 1990).

Unfortunately, the effectiveness of the whole language approach is difficult to assess because: (a) it is not well defined, and (b) problems exist in the development of instruments to assess the approach (McKenna, Robinson, & Miller, 1990).

Reading Recovery is an early intervention program for children experiencing difficulty in reading and has been found to be successful in solving early literacy problems (Pinnell, 1990). The program is based upon the research of Marie Clay, a New Zealand child psychologist who developed the program. The program seeks to empower children with strategies to employ during the reading process and focuses on teacher change (Moss, 1991). According to Pinnell, Reading Recovery has immediate and long-term effects and teaches even very low achieving student to read and spell. However, the Reading Recovery approach is only to be considered as part of an answer to the problems in literacy. The program is costly, requires extensive teacher training and provides the luxury of one-to-one tutoring for student participants.

Rosow (1991) stated that illiteracy is perpetuated by poor readers who do not understand the process of literacy. According

to McGill-Franzen and Allington (1991), children should not be penalized nor rewarded for the parents they have. Further, children, not programs, should be supported in an intensive effort to learn reading skills early and on schedule with their peers.

With the aforementioned thoughts in mind, the responsibility of developing and enhancing reading skills within the students becomes the direct responsibility of the schools. Students who do not acquire adequate reading skills become excluded from an entire form of communication - the written word and can be considered handicapped to a degree. This handicap becomes magnified over the course of time and has the potential to impede the students' ability to become productive members of society. As a result, the illiterate or non-reader becomes a burden on society.

Careful perusal of the literature has resulted in the following thoughts on the topic of language and literacy as it relates to choice, diversity, accountability, and national goals and standards. In order to ensure that all students acquire sufficient reading skills, it will become necessary for the schools' curricula to be adapted to accommodate the diverse learning styles of the students. A number of students may flourish in an environment which is based upon the official view of learning while others may flourish in an environment based

upon the informal view. Recognizing that all students can learn, it becomes incumbent upon the teacher to ascertain the teaching method(s) most compatible with the students' learning styles. Consequently, schools must be organized in a manner which provides teachers the time and resources to evaluate the students' learning styles and subsequently teach the students appropriately.

In 1990, President George Bush outlined six major educational goals in his America 2000 proposal. He called for demonstrated competence in the core subjects for students leaving the 4th, 8th and 12th grades. Additionally, he called for American students to be first in the world in math and science achievements by the year 2000. These goals may be unattainable inasmuch as vast numbers of American students are currently either poor readers or non-readers. How will it be possible for these students to be first in the world in any subject area if they lack adequate reading ability? It is evident that some type of intervention is necessary. Perhaps, the first major strategy should require the revamping of American goals to include, first and foremost, that all students be able to read proficiently. This would seem a feasible goal to adopt, for, if schools were held accountable for teaching all students language and literacy skills, exercising a choice option would merely mean selecting a school based on the curriculum it offers and not on the achievement scores of its students.

In my opinion, the adoption of a goal ensuring that all students have proficient reading skills would likely promote the implementation of effective strategies to enhance reading skills without focusing on the short-term cost of programs because literate members of society will contribute more than they detract from society. Neglecting to immediately address the major issue of language and literacy will predispose the United States to become a nation comprised of non-readers.

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